

Soiled Doves

Life on Helena's tenderloin

In the year 1885, Helena's city council approved an ordinance that prohibited women from working at any form of employment on Main Street. This action was intended to protect legitimate businesses and their patrons from "any prostitute, cortesán (sic), or lewd woman who shall by words, signs or action ply her avocation upon the streets, at doors, windows" or make "any meretricious display of herself upon the streets..."

Helena's soiled doves had apparently become over bold. The previous year five of the ladies had pulled a prank that caused something of an uproar. It started when theater-goers at Ming's Opera House complained about the seating of prostitutes in the conspicuous dress circle and parquette. Theater manager John Maguire was obliged thereafter to seat the Wood Street contingent in less obvious designated seats. Some time later, five of the Wood Street lovelies somehow stole habits from their neighbors, the Sisters of Charity, and arrived at the performance dressed as nuns with tickets in hand. To the consternation of the "moral" faction, the "nuns"

were ushered to the seats reserved for the less-than-chaste.

The above incident demonstrates a growing intolerance that took the form of ordinances like the one mentioned above. Rather than suppress these activities, however, this ordinance in fact forced the working girls off Main Street and created a red-light district in the older commercial part of town along Wood (now Miller), Bridge (now State) and Clore (now Park) streets where "proprietor madams" were already major property owners.

While the debate raged between city fathers over what to do with the sporting women, there were, in 1886, at least 52 white prostitutes living on and near Wood and Clore Streets. The skin trade in Helena at this time was in the hands of proprietor madams (women who rented out their properties to other women who ran them as houses of prostitution) who controlled a great deal of Helena real estate. Little is known about the personal lives except what can be pieced together from legal documents. Fortunately for the interested researcher, proprietor madams bought and sold real estate, took out mortgages with prominent businessmen and went to court perhaps more than the average citizen.

Three of these women built an empire in the heart of Helena's tenderloin that peaked in the late 1880s and, like so many other financial kingdoms of that era, began to topple after the economic Panic of 1893. One was Josephine "Chicago Joe" Hensley who was the subject of a previous column. Joe was a native of Ireland who had been initiated into the profession in Chicago



*Helena is pictured in about 1908, looking north across the tenderloin district toward the Bluestone House and the Fire Tower.
Photo courtesy Edward M. Reinig Collection, Montana Historical Society*

while still a teenager. She arrived in Helena with money in her purse in 1867 and began purchasing property on Wood Street. She also opened Helena's first female-run hurdy gurdy. By 1883 Joe owned more land on Wood Street than anyone, as well as property elsewhere in the city. Her infamous Coliseum, a theater of sorts built for \$23,000 on Bridge Street, had a payroll of \$1,000 a week.

Another successful madam was Lillie McGraw, also known as Bridget Ryan, who arrived in Helena from Portland in 1875. By 1880, she, too, owned considerable property on Wood Street. Her *maison de joie* (a bawdy house owned and managed by a madam) on Joliet Street was connected to her other houses by an elevated walkway.

A third was Mollie Byrnes, also known as Belle Crafton, who came to Helena from New Orleans in 1880. She also invested in Wood Street lots. In 1886 Mollie built "The Castle," an elegant *maison de joie* on Joliet Street diagonally across from Lillie's establishment.

These and other proprietor madams apparently maintained ties with other cities and established a sort of network, importing and trading their "girls" by offering employment and references. One of the outsiders, Gussie Raymond, was temporarily living at No. 3 Wood Street in 1891 when she wrote a sorrowful letter about the scarcity of work and its transient nature. She writes of traveling to Butte where "there has not been a dollar since the mines closed," and coming to Helena where "...there were some women there already who had the only place there was there (sic) to rustle in." Gussie's letter provides a very rare look into the inner workings

of the demimonde, and substantiates the estimate that a prostitute's average stay in Helena was probably no more than a few weeks.

An 1890 city map of Helena clearly shows the red-light district clustered around the establishments of Lillie, Joe and Mollie, these "female boarding houses" are clearly marked and fall within shocking proximity of Catholic Hill and its attendant grammar school, an excellent example of the frontier tolerance more openly demonstrated a decade before. But what about architect James Stranahan? He chose to build a home - the Bluestone House - for his bride at the north end of Joliet Street directly overlooking Lillie's *maison de joie* and Mollie's "Castle." One has to wonder what the bride thought about this!

Financial difficulties of the 1890s affected the three red-light queens, who had overextended themselves expanding their businesses in the booming 1880s. In addition, sporting women in Helena in the 1890s were becoming more subject to tuberculosis, alcoholism, drug addiction and suicide as well as crimes perpetrated against them. There is an increasing incidence in all of these, substantiated in the written record. Even those at the top of the ladder were not immune.

By 1900, all three of the once-wealthy madams had succumbed. Lillie died at 61 in 1898, of cirrhosis of the liver. Her remaining property was sold at sheriff's auction. Chicago Joe died at 56 in 1899, of pneumonia, having just satisfied all her debts. She had lived like a queen, but she had also shared her wealth, anonymously financing the education of two younger sisters, two nieces, a nephew and a half-brother. Yet for all her business acumen, Joe could not even write her own name. And Mollie died in 1900, at 42 of acute alcoholism, some believed at the hands of her second husband. He remarried less than a year after her death and lived in her house on State Street until he died in 1951. That house with its wonderful twin towers stands today. It is, I am told, architecturally reminiscent of Mollie's Castle that, along with every other vestige of the demimonde, was wiped off the map by Urban Renewal some years ago. That house is the only reminder of the first time women ruled Helena's tenderloin. It was not until after World War II that women once again ruled Helena's demimonde. But that is another story.



This photo shows the opulent interior of the Mollie Byrnes House at 212 State Street.

Photos courtesy of the Montana Historical Society

Ellen Baumler coordinates Montana's National Register of Historic Places sign program at the State Historic Preservation Office, Montana Historical Society